

A report on

St John's College

**College Green
William Nicholls Drive
Old St Mellons
Cardiff
CF3 5YX**

Date of inspection: March 2026

by

**Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education
and Training in Wales**

About St John's College

Name of provider	St John's College
Proprietor status	Charity and limited company
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Independent all age
Residential provision?	No
Number of pupils on roll	491
Pupils of statutory school age	377
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	12/02/2018
Start date of inspection	02/03/2026

School context:

St John's College is an independent day school for boys and girls aged 3 to 18 years, situated in the village of Old St Mellons on the eastern edge of Cardiff. It is the choir school for the Metropolitan Cathedral of Cardiff, with choristers drawn from Years 3 to 13. It has a Catholic ethos and welcomes pupils from all faiths or none.

The school is organised into four departments, with the majority of year groups named according to pupils' age at the start of the academic year. The school's departments are infants (Nursery to Year 2), juniors (Years 3 to 6), seniors (Years 7 to 11) and a sixth form (Years 12 and 13). There are currently 491 pupils on roll, including 104 in the sixth form. Although the majority of pupils come from south Wales, the school has pupils from other parts of Europe, the USA, and the Middle and Far East.

The school is non-selective. Pupils in juniors are generally guaranteed admission to the senior school. Those joining at a later stage sit English and mathematics admission assessments to inform baseline attainment.

The school's ethos is underpinned by its mission statement "Education from the heart", and it aims to encourage the whole school community to be the best it can be.

The headteacher was appointed in the second half of 2018 and the school was last inspected in February 2018.

Summary

St John's College is a welcoming, ambitious and caring community where nearly all pupils make strong progress. A shared culture of high expectations underpins exemplary behaviour, strong work ethics and highly positive attitudes to learning. Professional relationships between staff and pupils are warm, respectful and trusting, fostering an inclusive atmosphere where pupils feel valued, safe and happy.

Well-being is prioritised alongside academic success. The school provides a wide range of highly effective well-being support across phases and promotes pupils' moral and social development through charitable work, cultural celebrations and a vibrant recognition of Welsh culture.

The curriculum is broad, balanced and enriched by extensive extracurricular opportunities. The majority of teaching in the early years and juniors is strong, promoting a love of both reading and practical learning, and leading to rapid development of pupils' literacy, numeracy and oracy skills. In the senior school and sixth form, flexible timetabling enables personalised programmes through which nearly all pupils develop strong subject knowledge. As a result, pupils' performance in public examinations is consistently significantly above national averages. Where teaching is most effective, adaptive questioning and teachers' subject expertise combine to drive strong progress. However, in a minority of lessons, levels of challenge are inconsistent.

Leadership is ambitious, energetic and highly collaborative. Leaders evaluate the school's work accurately and identify appropriate priorities for improvement. Trustees are committed and knowledgeable and provide suitable oversight and valuable expertise regarding the school's business operations. However, their role as a critical friend, providing robust challenge and ensuring rigorous policy oversight, is less well developed.

In a few instances, checks to establish the continued suitability of staff have not kept pace with recent changes to legislation and, as a result, the school does not comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024.

Main evaluation

St John's college is a welcoming, supportive community where pupils benefit from a strong, shared culture of ambition and care. The school places an equal focus on developing pupils' learning and well-being. As a result, nearly all pupils achieve highly and are well prepared for life beyond school.

Culture, relationships and pupil behaviour

The school has successfully established a consistent culture of high expectations and ambition. Nearly all pupils demonstrate highly positive attitudes to learning, engage enthusiastically with their work and take considerable pride in its quality. Further, nearly all pupils are highly positive and supportive toward their peers, regularly celebrating each other's achievements. Behaviour is exemplary in lessons and around the school. They are highly welcoming to visitors and keen to share their learning and work.

Staff model the school's values consistently in their everyday interactions, creating a warm, inclusive and supportive culture in which pupils feel confident, valued, and well cared for. Professional relationships between pupils and staff are highly positive and are characterised by mutual respect and trust. Staff know their pupils extremely well. As a result, pupils feel safe, valued and confident.

Personal development (spiritual, moral and cultural)

The school's Catholic ethos is evident throughout its provision, with collective worship playing a central role in daily life. Alongside and through this, the school also embraces and celebrates the beliefs of those of all faiths and none. Throughout the curriculum, there is a purposeful intent to foster spiritual growth. As a result, pupils benefit from a wide range of opportunities to celebrate, and to wonder at, the world they live in.

The school has a deeply embedded charitable culture which promotes pupils' moral and social development well. A well-established culture of charitable work enables pupils to contribute meaningfully to their community. Cultural development is enhanced through multi-faith visits, music and enrichment activities that broaden pupils' understanding effectively. For example, a well-established cultural celebration day, organised by pupils, celebrates the diversity of cultures and beliefs represented.

The school celebrates being a school in Wales through music, language and drama activities. For example, the school's Eisteddfod for pupils a vibrant celebration of St David's Day, with strong house-based entries in instrumental music, singing, recitation and choirs. As a result, pupils develop a secure understanding of Welsh culture and heritage.

Support for pupils' well-being

The school places equal priority on both the academic success and the well-being of pupils. This is illustrated by the appointment of a full-time member of non-teaching staff with responsibility for health and well-being who works closely with heads of school. Interventions for emotional support are implemented across the infant and junior schools. This programme equips staff to support pupils with issues such as friendships, anxiety, neurodiversity, transition between phases, grief and puberty. In addition, in the senior and sixth form, counselling services are available to all pupils. As a result, nearly all pupils feel confident that they can access timely, effective support when facing challenges.

A termly survey, adapted to suit each phase, enables staff to monitor pupil well-being effectively. Outcomes are used to shape and improve the personal, social and health elements of the curriculum and other well-being provision. For example, a sleep practitioner was commissioned to work with parents. Sixth form pupils are supported through useful sessions such as cooking at university and how to manage examination pressure. This is in addition to well-being sessions, such as sound bath sessions.

Support for pupil transition

The school provides highly effective arrangements for pupil induction and transition across all ages. Comprehensive support systems ensure that pupils feel confident, welcomed and well-prepared when joining the school or moving between different key stages. As a result, pupils settle quickly, develop confidence in new environments and maintain positive attitudes to learning.

Pupils are supported well to consider and plan for their future pathways. For younger pupils, this involves opportunities to explore personal goals and aspirations. Senior pupils explore potential careers using an online platform to help them select related GCSE and A-Level options. This system is complemented by opportunities for pupils to research various careers and to engage in useful work experience. In addition, external advisors and guest speakers provide additional impartial advice to pupils to support career choices and plans. As a result, many pupils say the school helps them to make informed decisions about their next steps.

Developing the leadership skills of pupils

Pupils across all phases benefit from a wide range of opportunities to take on leadership roles. These include playground pals, house captains, digital leaders and prefects. Systems for appointing pupils to leadership roles are transparent and fair with pupils and teachers participating in the selection process. In many instances, these roles play a valuable part in building a sense of community. For example, sixth form pupils offer a 'chill and chat' session for senior pupils. As a result of such opportunities, most pupils feel they are able to

make a positive difference to their school. Further, they feel their voices are heard and that their views are acted upon by the school.

Staff understand their responsibility to safeguard the pupils in their care, and the designated safeguarding person (DSP) ensures that staff receive regular, appropriate training. There is a well understood system to report safeguarding concerns relating to pupils. As part of its statutory safeguarding duties, the school has robust processes in place for safer recruitment, including employees, supply staff, contractors and volunteers.

Curriculum

The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum across all phases, enhanced by a rich programme of extra-curricular and enrichment opportunities. This is underpinned by a clear values-driven approach that promotes community engagement, pupil voice and cultural understanding effectively.

In the nursery and infant department, the curriculum is carefully designed to meet pupils' developmental needs. A strong emphasis on high-quality literature ensures that learning is cohesive and purposeful. For example, pupils in Year 1 apply their understanding of 'bossy verbs' to write instructions for making fruit kebabs, before testing the clarity of their writing in practice. This integration of literacy within meaningful contexts supports pupils to apply their skills with increasing confidence and accuracy.

In the junior department, the curriculum is strengthened by increasing access to specialist teaching, which supports continuity and progression. Opportunities such as weekly multi-age elective sessions, including activities like 'dart maths' and personal research projects, enable pupils to take ownership of their learning. This contributes to high levels of engagement and motivation.

In the senior school and sixth form, the curriculum is exceptionally broad and flexible. Personal pathways enable pupils to select courses aligned with their interests and aspirations, which supports progression to preferred destinations beyond school.

Teaching and assessment

Across the school, teaching is underpinned by strong relationships and positive learning environments. In the early years and infant classes, teaching is particularly effective in promoting engagement through practical and experiential learning. For instance, pupils in the nursery allotment develop their understanding through hands-on experiences, while Reception pupils enthusiastically explain their learning about dinosaurs, including how "herbivores have long necks" to reach leaves. These approaches foster curiosity and secure understanding.

In the junior department, where teaching is most effective, lessons inspire pupils and promote deep engagement. For example, pupils explore scientific concepts such as invisible magnetic fields and non-Newtonian fluids through practical investigation, or recreate Picasso's cubist work using 3D objects in art. These experiences support pupils to develop both subject knowledge and creativity. However, a minority of lessons lack sufficient challenge or inspiration, which limits opportunities for deeper thinking.

In the senior school and sixth form, most teachers demonstrate strong subject expertise and use this well to guide pupils' learning. In the most effective lessons, questioning is probing and adaptive. Teachers respond dynamically to pupils' answers, reshaping explanations and encouraging deeper reasoning. As a result, pupils articulate complex ideas clearly and make thoughtful connections. However, in less effective practice, activities are too uniform and questioning focuses too heavily on recall. This restricts opportunities for pupils to explain their reasoning or engage in extended academic discussion.

Assessment processes are well established, particularly in the senior school and sixth form. Teachers use detailed tracking of classwork, homework and examination performance to monitor pupils' progress closely. This information is used effectively to set personalised targets and identify where support or intervention is required.

In many lessons, teachers provide effective in-the-moment verbal feedback and use questioning to identify and address misconceptions. Where this is most effective, it accelerates pupils' progress and deepens their understanding. However, where teaching is less adaptive, assessment information is not always used sufficiently well to tailor challenge, limiting its overall impact on learning. However, where teaching is less demanding, pupils' deeper conceptual understanding and higher-order thinking are less consistently developed.

Teachers' understanding of examination requirements is a particular strength. They model subject-specific terminology clearly and align feedback closely with marking criteria. This ensures that pupils have a clear understanding of how to improve their work and perform successfully in assessments.

Impact on pupils' skills and development

Across the school, most pupils make strong progress from their starting points. In the early years and infant department, nearly all pupils develop secure early literacy and numeracy skills. They read confidently, discuss books with enthusiasm and write accurately for a range of purposes. Their ability to apply skills meaningfully is evident in activities such as writing and testing instructions or explaining scientific ideas in simple terms.

In the junior department, pupils build effectively on these foundations. They develop increasingly sophisticated reading and analytical skills, for example when analysing poetry by Benjamin Zephaniah or interpreting World War II propaganda posters. By the end of this phase, most pupils communicate confidently and write effectively for a wide range of audiences, presenting their work neatly and coherently.

In the senior school and sixth form, through personalised GCSE and A Level programmes, nearly all pupils develop strong subject knowledge. From their starting points, nearly all pupils make at least expected progress, with many making exceptional progress compared to their peers nationally. As a result, performance in public examinations is consistently significantly above national averages.

During their time in the senior school and sixth form, most pupils develop strong literacy skills. Their reading skills enable them to interpret complex texts and draw well-reasoned conclusions, such as when considering whether Lady Macbeth conforms to female stereotypes. Their writing is well developed and adaptable, as seen in imaginative historical accounts or evaluative essays on topics such as the risks to England during Elizabeth I's reign.

Most pupils also develop strong mathematical and problem-solving skills. For example, senior pupils apply multi-step reasoning effectively to solve geometry problems, and sixth formers confidently engage with advanced concepts such as hypothesis testing and mechanics.

Where teaching provides sufficient challenge, many pupils demonstrate highly developed analytical and reasoning skills. For instance, in music, pupils analyse compositions and justify how syncopation could improve their work. Similarly, in modern foreign languages, sixth form pupils engage in thoughtful discussion about cultural and political issues, articulating their ideas with confidence.

Strategic leadership within a collaborative culture

The headteacher and the senior leadership team have a strong shared vision and provide clear strategic direction based on high expectations. Leaders support this vision with their energy and positivity, along with a clear sense of direction for the future of the school. As a result, all staff understand the school's priorities for improvement, and their role in implementing them.

Leaders work together closely and take a collegiate approach to school improvement. This approach ensures accountability, balanced appropriately with professional autonomy. However, this approach is in the early stages of embedding, and it is still too early to evaluate its full impact.

Leaders at all levels employ a systematic programme of first-hand evidence gathering to quality assure the school's work. The self-evaluation process is honest, reflective and accurate. Leaders use their findings to identify appropriate priorities for improvement, and they monitor the implementation of resulting actions closely. However, too often, the plans' success criteria are not closely linked to pupils' outcomes, making it difficult for leaders to evaluate the success of their actions.

Leaders identify effective practice in teaching and pupil wellbeing and promote this through purposeful opportunities for staff collaboration. For example, in the junior department, staff benefit from drop-in carousel sessions to share and discuss practice. This culture of sharing has begun to bring about improvements in provision, for example, in fostering teaching that meets individual pupils' needs.

Leaders provide effective, strategic oversight of professional learning. As a result, staff benefit from a wide range of purposeful professional learning opportunities which are well-matched to the development priorities, while providing suitable scope for teachers to develop their own practice and career pathways.

Performance management processes across the school are thorough and robust. Leaders have worked to re-frame the school's approach to lesson observations, following feedback from staff, moving away from a compliance-driven model. As a result, observations are now more developmental in nature and focus on professional dialogue and collaboration to improve classroom practice.

The Trustees have first-hand knowledge of the school and are invested in its purpose and mission. They fulfil many of their duties diligently, including oversight of the school's financial situation and development of the school estate. However, their role as a critical friend, for example, in providing challenge around leaders' evaluation of improvement work, is currently underdeveloped. In addition, their work in ensuring that all school policies and processes are drawn up and implemented in line with the Independent School Standards lacks attention to detail.

In a few instances, checks to establish the continued suitability of staff have not kept pace with changes to legislation and, as a result, the school does not comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024.

Compliance with the regulations for registration

Independent school inspections are governed by the Education Act 2002 and related regulations: the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024. These regulations require an independent school to meet an appropriate standard in the following areas:

The quality of education provided by the school

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this Standard.

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this Standard.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this Standard.

The suitability of proprietors and staff

The school does not meet the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Although the school meets almost all of the regulatory requirements for this standard, in order to comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024 the proprietor should, in relation to members of staff at the school:

- where an individual is registered with the DBS up-date service, check the individual's certificate status at least every three years **[23(a)(i)]**
- where an individual is not registered with the DBS up-date service, apply for a DBS certificate in respect of that individual at least every three years **[23(a)(ii)]**

Premises of and boarding accommodation at schools

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this Standard.

The provision of information

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this Standard.

The manner in which complaints are to be handled

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this Standard.

Safeguarding

The school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils do not give any cause for concern.

Recommendations

We have made three recommendations to help the school continue to improve:

- R1 Meet the requirements of the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024
- R2 Build on best practice to ensure that teaching provides consistent levels of stretch and challenge for all pupils
- R3 Strengthen the trustees' role as a critical friend to the school

What happens next

Since the school does not meet the standards required for registration, the Welsh Government will require the proprietor to submit an action plan within a specified period of time. This plan will set out the steps that the school will take to meet the standards, and the timescale within which it will complete each step. Welsh Government may then request Estyn to support the school through an improvement process.

Estyn advises the proprietor to amend its current development plan to show what actions the school intends to take in response to the recommendations. It is also advisable to circulate this plan, or a summary of it, to all parents/carers at the school.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from parent/carer and pupil questionnaires and consider the views of teachers and support staff through their questionnaire responses

During an inspection, inspectors normally:

- hold a meeting with parents/carers to hear their views on the school and its effectiveness
- meet the headteacher, governors/proprietor(s), leaders and individual teachers to evaluate the impact of the school's work
- meet pupils to discuss their work and to gain their views about various aspects of their school
- meet groups of pupils in leadership roles, such as representatives from the school council and eco-committee
- visit lessons and undertake a variety of learning walks to observe pupils learning
- look closely at the school's self-evaluation processes
- consider the school's improvement plan and look at evidence to show how well the school had taken forward planned improvements
- scrutinise a range of school documents, including information on pupil assessment and progress, records of meetings of staff and the governing body (where appropriate), information on pupils' well-being, including the safeguarding of pupils, and records of staff training and professional development

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection

Appendix 1: Numbers – quantities and proportions

The report makes references to different quantities and proportions e.g. '*most pupils...*' or '*very few pupils...*'. We use these terms to describe quantities and proportions as outlined in the table below:

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (<http://www.estyn.gov.wales/>)

The report was produced in accordance with section 163 of the Education Act 2002. The main purpose of inspection under this section is to report on compliance with the Independent Schools Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024. In schools that provide non-maintained nursery education, this report also satisfies the requirements of Schedule 26 of the School Standards and Framework

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of publication. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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Publication date: 07/05/2026